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Proposal: Whole Earth evaluation of environmental organizations

This document reflects the thinking of Howard Rheingold and Kelly Teevan about the proposal to pursue the idea of rating environmental organizations. This is the first draft. There is little argument as to whether, done correctly, such a project could have great benefits in educating the public and could also benefit the environmental non-profit sector itself.

Approach

This must be done right. There is a lot of potential liability involved with no short-term benefit, so this should be approached very cautiously. Whole Earth at present is in the midst of a major transition and has its hands full, so this project will work best for Whole Earth if it designed not to drain much-needed management and financial resources. This can be achieved if someone is hired to do all the work involved, that person's work is fully funded, and Whole Earth is reimbursed for the time it devotes to this project.

The key is to get the right person. The full attention of a very qualified person would be required to make this happen. Such a person will be hard to find and would probably demand far higher pay than the Whole Earth pay scale allows. Consequently, this should be structured as an independent, off-site position. (Given the location of most of the non-profits--environmental or other--someone in the New York/Washington D.C. area would make sense.)

The following conditions would make it easiest to recruit a good person:

- s/he gets to decide what to do, within broad guidelines;
- the pay and budget are high enough;
- there is full support of the Whole Earth Board and staff;
- the funding is there both for the evaluation phase and for on-going operations--this would reduce the risk for this person; we're not asking this person to be a fund raiser along with everything else.

The person would ideally have at least the following qualifications:

- credibility in the environmental community;
- a good working knowledge of environmental organizations;
- a good working knowledge of environmental policy, project, science and legal matters;
- skill in getting information without alienating people;
- skill in writing and other communication;
- skill in understanding numbers and financial statements;
- skill in planning and follow-up;

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skill in sticking to timeline and budget.

Proposed steps in pursuing the idea

Develop initial plan (How to cover cost of this step?)
- Circulate this document for comments
- Incorporate comments
- Get Paul Hawken's pledge to fund the work

Get the right person to do it (Cost--$1000 to $10,000 up?)
- Use the grapevine or headhunter to look for such a person.
- If there's no good candidate, STOP.
- If there are good candidates, interview them.
- If there's a good candidate and we can hire her or him, do it.

Evaluation period (Budget $20,000 to $25,000?)
- Person hired develops a budget;
  - develops process, criteria, list of organizations;
  - does investigation;
  - makes report and recommendation.

Decide whether to launch
- If launch, need funding in place.
- Decide location, budget, etc. (Annual budget $150,000 to $200,000?)
- If not launch, perhaps use research for an article.

Budgets--very rough

Recruitment: headhunter 20% (?) of $60,000 annual salary = $12,000; plus travel to fly candidates to SF.
Evaluation: 1/4 year @ $60,000/year, plus research materials, travel, phone, (rent?) = $20,000 to $25,000
Ongoing annual operations: 1 person @ $60,000; 1 assistant @ $30,000; rent; travel; phone; research expenses; printing and publicizing of reports; consultants; accounting.
Total: $150,000 to $200,000.

Questions to address about the process:

What relationship with the funding do we have to have to maintain credibility and independence?
What policies and procedures do we need to have credibility?
Who should be involved, to set policy, to set budgets, to review results?
How does Whole Earth get reimbursed for resources it contributes to this process?
How do we find the right person?
Can we offer to hire someone for just three months and not eliminate good candidates?
How much time is needed to evaluate whether we should do this?
How do we motivate the person to recommend not pursuing the project, if it should not be pursued, and putting himself/herself out of a job?
Is there a logistical problem with the organizations we want to evaluate mostly being located other than where we are?